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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings of a study that investigated elementary school principals' perceptions of parent-involvement practices in their schools. A survey was mailed to 75 principals of high-achieving elementary schools and to 75 principals of low-achieving elementary schools. The perceptions of 39 principals of high-achieving schools were compared with those of 30 principals of low-achieving schools. Both high and low academically achieving elementary schools frequently practiced the same top five parent-involvement activities: sending students' work home; holding problem-solving conferences with parents; sending letters and notes home; scheduling back-to-school nights and open houses; and providing special events. The top five activities corresponded to those identified in Epstein's "overlapping spheres of influence" conceptual framework. High-achieving elementary schools had more active parent-teacher organizations and sent home more classroom newsletters than did their low-achieving counterparts. Principals at both types of schools reported that they took very active leadership roles in their schools' parent-participation programs and believed that their teachers actively tried to involve parents in their children's education. However, teachers at high academically achieving schools were seen by principals as having more positive relationships with parents than teachers at low-achieving schools. Slightly more than half of the teachers at each type of school received training to foster parent involvement. Six tables are included. (Contains 22 references.) (LMI)

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PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT PRACTICES IN HIGH AND LOW ACADEMICALLY ACHIEVING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

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The message articulated in the African proverb that "it takes the whole village to educate the child" is being taken seriously by policy makers. Goals 2000 legislation placed into law six national goals for education first developed by former President Bush and the nation's governors, plus two new goals--one having to do with parent involvement. Supported by a burgeoning number of studies, the importance of involving families in their children's education has become a significant part of America's educational agenda (Jennings, 1994; National Education Goals Panel, 1994).

Although the research clearly indicates that children achieve more and behave better when schools and families work together to support learning, the role of the principal in taking the lead to work with teachers in planning and implementing the school's parent involvement program has not been fully explored (Henderson & Berla, 1994). Even though many educators believe the "overlapping spheres of influence" theoretical model developed by Epstein (1987a) provides a sound conceptual framework to use in planning a school's parent involvement program, few researchers have addressed the model in their studies. The literature does not indicate which specific parent involvement activities are more effective than others for involving families in the educational process. Identifying parent involvement activities that Mississippi principals perceive to be effective in their schools is important because of the scarcity of resources. If principals are to take a leadership role in working with teachers and others to develop

effective parent involvement programs and use scarce resources wisely, their perceptions of what is taking place in their schools in regard to involving parents in children's education need to be investigated.

The purpose of this descriptive study was to investigate whether significant differences existed in the perceptions of principals of elementary schools with high academic achievement compared to the perceptions of principals of elementary schools with low academic achievement in relation to parent involvement practices at their schools. Specific attention was given to investigating the use of parent involvement activities, effort made by teachers to involve parents, teacher relationships with parents, importance given to parent involvement, leadership role taken by principals, and training provided teachers.

Involving Parents in Their Children's Education

There is much need to encourage parents to take an active role in their children's education if more students are to be successful in school. Parent involvement research (Solomon, 1991) shows that students who are successful in school come from environments which include "long term support from parents or other adults at home as well as strong support from teachers and others at school" (p. 359). Maintaining that active family participation should be a focus of state and local initiatives, Solomon called for educational leaders to go beyond traditional statements of policy and actually design action plans which enlist parent involvement in children's schooling.

For over two decades, parent involvement studies have suggested that benefits for students occurred when parents are active in parent-teacher organizations, help children with homework, and volunteer in traditional ways at school, such as serving as classroom or library aides (Becher, 1978; Gordon, 1970, 1979; Greenwood, Breivogel, & Bessent, 1972; Henderson, 1981; Leichter, 1974; Rich & Jones,1977). According to a recent research synthesis by Henderson and Berla (1994) covering 66 parent involvement studies, reviews, reports, and books, the evidence supporting parent involvement is beyond dispute. They reported:

> When schools work together with families to support learning, children tend to succeed not just in school, but throughout life. In fact, the most accurate predictor of a student's achievement in school is not income or social status, but the extent to which that student's family is able to: (a) create a home environment that encourages learning, (b) express high expectations for their children's achievement and future careers, and (c) become involved in their children's education at school and in the community. (p. 1)

When schools support families to develop these three conditions, children from culturally diverse backgrounds and low socioeconomic conditions approach the academic achievement expected for middle-class children. Also, they are more likely to take advantage of the educational opportunities available for them after graduating from high school. Moreover, families benefit too. Parents develop more confidence in the school and in being able to help their children learn at home. Henderson and Berla (1994) stated, "When parents are involved in their children's education at home, their children do better in school. When parents are involved at school, their children go farther in school, and the schools they go to are better" (p. 1).

Based on the information presented in the Henderson and Berla report and other parent involvement studies (Epstein & Dauber, 1991), the effort and time spent by school staffs to involve parents in their children's education appears to be a wise investment. Schools that work well with families are considered to have more support, higher teacher morale and better reputations in their community.

Epstein (1987a, 1987b, 1988a, 1988b), a noted researcher on the subject of parent involvement, advanced the theory that, within over-lapping spheres of influence, there are five major types of involvement which help families and schools meet their shared responsibilities for children's development and learning. Her major purpose for developing the theory was to clarify what the term "parent involvement" actually meant.

Epstein referred to type one involvement as the "basic obligations of families." She contended that families are responsible for providing for children's health and safety, preparing children for school, teaching practical life skills, and building positive home conditions which support school learning and behavior expectations.

Type two involvement pertained to the "basic obligations of schools." According to Epstein, schools are responsible for communicating with families about their programs and students' progress. Communication includes report cards, letters, notes, phone calls and visits. Schools that vary the form and frequency of their communications with parents best meet the needs of families.

"Involvement at school" was the third type of involvement. In type three, Epstein included parents and other volunteers who assist in classrooms and other areas of the school (e.g., library). She also

included parents attending workshops and other programs for their own education and training, as well as attending student performances, sports, or other events.

Type four involvement addressed "involvement in learning activities at home." Epstein defined this type of involvement as teachers helping parents to monitor and assist in their children's learning at home. She contended that it is the responsibility of the school to enable families to understand how to help their children at home. Teachers should assist parents in how to interact with their children on activities coordinated with the school's curriculum or activities designed to enrich learning. Epstein believes this type of parent involvement is closely related to student academic achievement.

"Involvement in decision making, governance and advocacy" constituted the fifth type of involvement. Type five involvement addresses parents and others in the community being active in parent-teacher organizations (e.g., PTA), serving on advisory councils and other committees, and working as advocates for school improvement. Schools assist in this area by training parents to be leaders and involving them in the decision-making process.

According to Epstein's theoretical model, these five types of involvement interact to form the framework for a comprehensive program guided by three goals: (a) to improve school programs, classroom management and teacher effectiveness; (b) to improve student learning and development; (c) to improve parents' awareness of their role in children's educational, social and personal development across the school years. Epstein contends that schools with comprehensive parent involvement programs communicate better with the home, take

responsibility to help parents assist in their children's learning at home, encourage parents to become active participants at school, and invite parents to contribute to decisions that affect school programs and their children's education.

Starling (1991) contended, however, that involving parents in their children's schooling is a bigger task than most school administrators imagine. Getting parents to become part of schooling takes effort and requires much more than the traditional letter to join the PTA. Although principals and teachers know parent involvement is essential, many feel that it is too much trouble or that parents won't be very helpful once they become involved. Also, many parents are too busy to become involved or are intimidated by the prospect of school involvement.

Henderson (1988) stated that developing a successful parent involvement program requires wholehearted commitment on the part of a school's staff. According to Henderson, the main barrier to parent involvement is not parent apathy, but lack of support from the staff and tepid leadership from the principal. She contended that many parents will not become involved unless the principal and school staff show through their actions that they want them involved.

Methodology

A descriptive research design was used in this study. According to Hinkle, Wiersma and Jur (1988), descriptive statistics "is a collection of methods for classifying and summarizing numerical data" (p. 18). In order to structure the study, six research questions were developed. The research questions were:

1. Do principals from high and low academically achieving elementary schools differ significantly in their perceptions toward selected parent involvement activities?

2. Do principals from high and low academically achieving elementary schools differ significantly in their perceptions concerning the percent of teachers who actively try to involve parents in their children's education?

3. Do principals from high and low academically achieving elementary schools differ significantly in their perceptions of the overall relationship between teachers and parents in their schools?

4. Do principals from high and low academically achieving elementary schools differ significantly in how important they believe it is to take a leadership role in working with teachers to plan and implement the school's parent involvement program?

5. Do principals from high and low academically achieving elementary schools differ significantly in how they rate themselves in taking a parent involvement leadership role at their school?

6. Do principals from high and low academically achieving elementary schools differ significantly in their perceptions of the parent involvement training provided teachers?

In addition to investigating the six research questions which guided the study, attention was given to Epstein's (1987a) "overlapping spheres of influence" theoretical model as a means for better understanding school and family relationships. Findings from the study were examined in relation to her theory.

Two limitations of the study, however, must be noted. First, the subjects participating in the study were not randomly selected and only

included principals of elementary schools with high academic achievement and principals of elementary schools with low academic achievement in the State of Mississippi. Consequently, it is difficult to generalize about the research findings. The results may be limited to the subjects comprising the study. Secondly, data presented in the study were self-reported. Ratings were based on what the subjects said about themselves and their school's parent involvement practices. Self-report measures are problematic. They may tell more about how the principals wish to appear than about the true state of parent involvement in their schools. What the principals reported may differ from what actually occurred.

The subjects in this study consisted of 39 principals from elementary schools with high academic achievement and 30 principals from elementary schools with low academic achievement. The subjects were selected from 457 Mississippi elementary schools. Using data provided by the Mississippi Department of Education (1993), the 457 schools were ranked from 1-457 based on normal curve equivalency (NCE) composite scores made by fourth grade students on the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT). A population of principals representing the 75 highest academically achieving schools (i.e., schools with SAT scores rankings from 1-75) and a population of principals representing the 75 lowest academically achieving schools (i.e., schools with SAT score rankings from 382-457) were identified on the basis of achievement test scores. According to Hinkle, Wiersma and Jur (1988), "a population includes all members of a specified group" (p. 16). The distinguishing characteristic of a population is that all those who meet the definition for membership are included. Both populations of principals were sent questionnaires.

Of the 75 principals serving in high academically achieving schools, 39 responded. Thirty out of the 75 principals serving in low academically achieving schools responded.

Data for this study were collected using a questionnaire developed by the researcher. A Likert-type measurement scale for all items in the questionnaire, except for one open-ended question, was used to investigate the principals' perceptions about parent involvement practices at their schools. Ordinal measurement was used; that is, data were measured by rank order. For example, the reported use of a parent involvement activity such as "letters and notes regularly sent home by teachers" was measured according to one of four responses: high use, moderate use, low use, or no use. Rankings were relative to each other in that "high use" indicated greater frequency than "low use." Based on the design of the questionnaire, it was not possible to determine if the difference between "low use" and "moderate use" was equal to the difference between "moderate use" and "high use." The scale did not measure exact distances in numerical terms.

Several steps were involved in the data analysis. In the first step, the respondents' demographic characteristics were summarized. In the second step, the number and percentage of principals selecting a particular response ranging from "yes" or "high use" to "no" or "no use" were computed for each of 25 items on the questionnaire. Responses were based on principals' perceptions of parent involvement in their schools. Means were also computed for items 1-20 during the second step. One of the questionnaire items consisted of an open-ended question. This question was addressed in step three. Principals' responses to the open-ended question were recorded and categorized. The chi-square test of

homogeneity, a nonparametric measurement test, was performed in step four. Because the level of measurement was ordinal and precise measurement was not possible, the chi-square test statistic was used to test perceptual similarities and differences between the two groups of principals toward selected parent involvement variables (Borg & Gall, 1989; Hinkle, Wiersma & Jurs, 1988).

Findings and Discussion

The first research question investigated in this study addressed parent involvement activities. Findings indicated that principals of high achieving elementary schools reported that the five most frequently used parent involvement activities were (1) sending home samples of student work, (2) individual parent-teacher conferences (e.g.,for academic or behavioral problems), (3) teachers sending letters and notes home to parents, (4) back-to-school nights and open houses, and (5) special events such as musical performances or science fairs. Principals of low achieving elementary schools reported that the same five parent involvement activities were also used the most frequently in their schools.

Chi-square values computed for the purpose of evaluating the first research question are reported in Table 1. Information provided in the table includes degrees of freedom, computed values and probability. Chi-square computed values are from large to small. The larger the computed value, the more likely high and low academically achieving elementary schools differ in the use of parent involvement activities as perceived by principals.

Descriptions of the 20 selected parent involvement activities presented in abbreviated form in the table are as follows: Reg par conf (regularly scheduled conferences), Indiv par conf (conferences for problem solving purposes), Let/notes ho (letters and notes sent home by teachers to parents), Stu wk sent ho (samples of student work sent home to keep parents informed), Stu recogn (student recognition messages such as happy grams), Good news cal (good news calls from teachers informing parents that their children were recognized for something well done), Clrm newslet (classroom newsletters sent home to keep parents informed), Home visits (home visits by teachers and/or community-liaison aides), Ho read prog (home reading programs designed to encourage children to read for pleasure at home), Ho math prog (home math programs designed to increase children's math skills), Brochures bul (written materials in the form of brochures, bulletins or tips for parents), Act calendars (activity calendars indicating learning activities that can be done at home), Par workshops (parent workshops or course designed to teach parents how to help their children with learning at home), Cre homework (creative homework assignments used by teachers to extend learning to the home and encourage parent-child interaction), Par-t organiz (parent-teacher organizations, such as a PTA or PTO, that provide general service to the school), Par adv comm (parents involved on school advisory committees or councils), Back sch night (back-to-school night, open houses and other orientation meetings), Inform meet (informal meetings with parents to exchange ideas), Spec events (special events for parents such as music performances, art or science fairs, carnivals, etc.), and Par volun (parent volunteers assisting in classrooms or the library).

TABLE 1. PERCEIVED DIFFERENCES IN PARENT INVOLVEMENT ACTIVITIES AT HIGH AND LOW ACHIEVING SCHOOLS

			(n = 39, n = 30)	
Rank	Activity	df	χ^2	p
1	Par-t organiz	3	10.15	.017*
2	Clrm newslet	3	8.93	.030*
3	Parent volun	3	6.52	.089
4	Home visits	3	6.28	.099
5	Par adv comm	2	5.92	.052
6	Reg par conf	3	5.11	.164
7	Ho read prog	3	4.48	.214
8	Par workshops	3	3.20	.361
9	Back sch night	2	3.00	.223
10	Act calendars	3	2.42	.489
11	Let/notes ho	2	2.27	.321
12	Indiv par conf	2	2.23	.327
13	Inform meet	3	1.68	.642
14	Ho math prog	3	1.57	.666
15	Brochures bul	3	1.56	.670
16	Stu wk sent ho	2	1.32	.516
17	Cre homework	3	1.04	.791
18	Stu recogn	2	.72	.697
19	Spec events	2	.66	.719
20	Good news cal	2	.22	.895

As indicated by the chi-square values presented in Table 1, a statistically significant difference between high and low academically achieving elementary schools was found for two activities: (1) parent-teacher organizations and (2) sending classroom newsletters home to inform parents. Principals of high academically achieving schools reported that their parent-teacher organizations were more active than did principals of low academically achieving schools. Principals of elementary schools with high academic achievement also reported that 69% of their teachers regularly send classroom newsletters home compared to 40% of the teachers in low achieving schools. Eighteen parent involvement activities did not show a statistically significant difference.

In addition to reporting frequency of use among 20 parent involvement activities, principals identified parent involvement activities practiced the most at their schools. Principals from elementary schools with high academic achievement identified the following five activities: (1) parents volunteering to help in the library or classroom, (2) parents participating in parent-teacher organizations (e.g., PTA or PTO), (3) parents participating and assisting in events at school (e.g., back-to-school night, carnivals, science fairs, etc.), (4) parents making classroom learning materials and games, and (5) parents supervising field trips. Principals from elementary schools with low academic achievement identified many of the same activities.

Research questions two and three investigated principals' perceptions regarding the percent of teachers actively trying to involve parents in their children's schooling and the relationship between

teachers and parents in the school. The chi-square value computed for the purpose of evaluating question two is reported in Table 2. Data are reported according to four ordinal measures. Information provided in the table includes the number and percent of principals selecting a particular category. Percentages are enclosed by parentheses. The table also presents probability.

TABLE 2. PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS CONCERNING THE PERCENT OF TEACHERS IN HIGH AND LOW ACHIEVING SCHOOLS TRYING TO INVOLVE PARENTS IN CHILDREN'S EDUCATION

	Number and Percent	
Involving Parents	High	Low
75% or more teachers	19 (49)	15 (50)
50% to 74% of teachers	14 (36)	10 (33)
25% to 49% of teachers	4 (10)	5 (17)
Less than 25% of teachers	2 (05)	0 (00)

χ^2 (3, n = 39, n = 30) = 2.11, p = .550

The chi-square value presented in Table 2 shows no statistically significant difference in principals' perceptions of teachers in high achieving elementary schools and teachers in low achieving schools. Both groups of principals see their teachers as actively trying to involve parents in their children's education.

The chi-square value computed for the purpose of evaluating question three is reported in Table 3. Data are reported according to five ordinal measures ranging from "extremely positive" to "not

positive" by the number and percent of principals selecting a particular category. Percentages are enclosed by parentheses. Probability is also reported.

TABLE 3. PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE OVERALL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN TEACHERS AND PARENTS IN HIGH AND LOW ACHIEVING SCHOOLS

	Number and Percent	
Relationships	High	Low
Extremely positive	7 (18)	0 (00)
Very positive	23 (59)	9 (30)
Positive	8 (20)	15 (50)
Somewhat positive	1 (03)	6 (20)
Not positive	0 (00)	0 (00)

χ^2 (3, n = 39, n = 30) = 17.96, p = .001* (p < .01)

The chi-square value presented in Table 3 shows there was a statistically significant difference between principals from high academically achieving elementary schools and principals from low academically achieving elementary schools in their perceptions of the overall relationship between teachers and parents. Seventy-seven percent ("extremely positive" and "very positive" categories combined) of the principals from high achieving schools saw the overall relationship between teachers and parents as highly positive compared to only 30% of the principals from the low achieving schools.

Research question four investigated the importance that principals give to taking a leadership role in parent involvement, while research

question five investigated how active principals believe they are in taking a leadership role. The chi-square value computed for the purpose of evaluating question four is reported in Table 4. Data are reported according to five ordinal measures ranging from "extremely important" to "not important." Information is provided for the number and percent of principals selecting a particular category. Percentages are enclosed by parentheses. Probability is also reported.

TABLE 4. IMPORTANCE GIVEN TO TAKING A LEADERSHIP ROLE IN PARENT INVOLVEMENT BY PRINCIPALS FROM HIGH AND LOW ACHIEVING SCHOOLS

	Number and Percent	
Importance Given	High	Low
Extremely important	22 (56)	19 (63)
Very important	12 (31)	9 (30)
Important	5 (13)	1 (03)
Somewhat important	0 (00)	1 (03)
Not important	0 (00)	0 (00)

χ^2 (3, n = 39, n = 30) = 3.20, p = .363

The chi-square value presented in Table 4 shows no statistically significant difference between principals from high and low academically achieving elementary schools in how important they believe it is for the principal to take a leadership role in working with teachers to plan and implement schoolwide parent involvement programs. Both groups of principals believe it is important.

The chi-square value computed for the purpose of evaluating question five is reported in Table 5. Data are reported according to five ordinal measures ranging from "extremely active" to "not active." Information is provided for the number and percent of principals selecting a particular category. Percentages are enclosed by parentheses. Probability is also reported.

TABLE 5. LEADERSHIP ROLE TOWARD PARENT INVOLVEMENT TAKEN BY PRINCIPALS FROM HIGH AND LOW ACHIEVING SCHOOLS

	Number and Percent	
Leadership Role	High	Low
Extremely active	22 (57)	12 (40)
Very active	13 (33)	16 (53)
Active	4 (10)	2 (07)
Somewhat active	0 (00)	0 (00)
Not active	0 (00)	0 (00)

χ^2 (2, n = 39, n = 30) = 2.7918, p = .248

The chi-square value presented in Table 5 shows no statistically significant difference between principals of high and low academically achieving elementary schools in how active they rate themselves in taking a parent involvement leadership role at their schools. Both groups of principals report they are active.

Research question six investigated principals' perceptions of the training provided teachers in parent involvement. The chi-square value computed for the purpose of evaluating question six is reported in

Table 6. Data are reported according to "yes" or "no" by the number and percent of principals selecting a particular category. Percentages are enclosed by parentheses. Probability is also reported.

TABLE 6. PARENT INVOLVEMENT TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEACHERS IN HIGH AND LOW ACHIEVING SCHOOLS AS REPORTED BY PRINCIPALS

	Number and Percent	
Training Opportunities	High	Low
Training provided	22 (56)	17 (57)
Training not provided	17 (44)	13 (43)

χ^2 (1, n = 39, n = 30) = .001, p = .983

The chi-square value presented in Table 6 shows no statistically significant difference in the amount of training provided teachers in high and low academically achieving elementary schools as reported by principals. Approximately half of the teachers received training and half did not.

Conclusions

Both high and low academically achieving elementary schools frequently practice the same top five parent involvement activities--sending students' work home, holding problem-solving conferences with parents, sending letters and notes home, scheduling back-to-school nights and open houses, and providing special events. The top five activities identified by the principals correspond to the conceptual framework developed by Epstein (1987a). These frequently practiced

activities appear to constitute the foundation for an elementary school's parent involvement program.

Elementary schools with high academic achievement have more active parent-teacher organizations (e.g., PTA or PTO) than do elementary schools with low academic achievement. Also, teachers at elementary schools with high academic achievement send home more classroom newsletters to keep parents informed than do than do teachers at elementary schools with low academic achievement.

Elementary school principals believe their teachers actively try to involve parents in children's education. Teacher efforts are similar for both high and low academically achieving elementary schools. Teachers at high academically achieving elementary schools, however, are seen by principals as having more positive relationships with parents than do teachers at low achieving schools.

Principals from both high and low academically achieving elementary schools give high importance to taking a leadership role in their school's parent involvement program. They also report taking a very active leadership role.

Parent involvement training provided teachers in high and low academically achieving schools is the same. Slightly more than half of the teachers receive training.

Throughout the study, consideration was given to examining findings in relation to the "overlapping spheres of influence" theoretical model developed by Epstein (1987a) since this model provided the conceptual framework for the instrument used to collect data. The overlapping spheres of influence model views school and home as spheres of influence on students that can, by design, be pulled together or pushed apart by

interpersonal forces. The model is based on the assumption that children's learning, development, and general success are the main reasons for home and school partnerships.

The study's results were consistent with the "overlapping spheres of influence" theory. The five activities--sending students' work home, problem-solving conferences with parents, letters and notes sent home, back-to-school nights and open houses, and special events--reported to be most frequently practiced in the elementary schools in this study overlap the four school-initiated types of parent involvement identified in Epstein's conceptual framework.

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